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Sounding the Limits of Eroticism in Chaucer's "The Prioress's Tale"

For love is blynd alday, and may nat see

The Merchant's Tale, l. 354

Ful sooth is seyð that love ne lordshipe

Wol noght, his thankes, have no felaweshipe.

The Knight's Tale, ll. 767-768

I am ever a-gast, for why men rede,

That "love is thing ay ful of bisy drede".

Troilus and Criseyde, bk. iv, ll. 1645-1646

Chaucer's writings abound in wise, or not so wise, sayings and proverbs concerning love, most of which have a very ancient pedigree. The best known case of this can be found in his "General Prologue to 'The Canterbury Tales'", where we encounter the refined Prioress, sporting a brooch with an inscription saying, *Amor vincit omnia* ("love conquers all"), which, as is equally well known, can be interpreted as either earthly or divine love. If we are to judge by the Prioress's, pious though clearly anti-Semitic tale, it is apparently the latter kind of love that she first of all had in mind. Her tale actually concerns a triumph of religious love over the malice of the Church's enemies, and, perhaps even more importantly, over the laws of nature, since the young hero of her tale goes on singing his devotional song dedicated to the Virgin in spite of having his throat cut by the "hateful" Jews. The boy's singing is also a triumph of his mother's love, as it is she who by her urgent searching, and by her crying and shouting, provokes, as it were, her little son to resume his singing, and thus to reveal himself to her:

but Jhesu of his grace

Yaf in hir thoght inwith a litel space

That in that place after hir sone she cryde,

Where he was casten in a pit bisyde.

"The Prioress's Tale", ll. 603-606¹

¹ The quotations from Chaucer are based on: L. D. Benson (gen. ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

The nature of love in the Prioress's tale is not, however, devoid of certain subtly erotic overtones which seem to correspond to the Prioress's ingeniously coquettish behaviour described in the "General Prologue". Love in her tale is of course meant not to be erotic, in the sense "carnal", and the narrator takes considerable pains to assure the readers that such indeed is the case. The boy ("a litle clergeon", i.e. a schoolboy) is only seven years old, and his innocence and virginity are strongly emphasised, particularly in the following fragment:

O martir, sowded to virginitee,
 Now maystow syngen, folwyng evere in oon
 The white Lamb celestial – quod she –
 Of which the grette evaungelist, Seint John,
 In Pathmos wroot, which seith that they that goon
 Biforn this lamb and synge a song al newe,
 That nevere, fleshly, wommen they ne knewe.

ll. 579–585

The boy's status of a martyr is clearly fixed, solidified, made fast, literally "wedded" by his virginity, by the fact that "he never knew women fleshly", his mode of existence is seen as being on the opposite pole to the zone of the erotic, and yet, at the same time, its definition depends on the erotic. The latter is associated with everything transitory, changeable, and unreliable, or with blindness, wild anarchy, fear and uncertainty (as in the quotations adduced at the head of the present study) and functions as the most potent metaphor of those negative values, a metaphor that has to be evoked and denied if the reader is to believe seriously in the young martyr's sanctity.

The Prioress's impassioned exclamation has a slightly ironic aspect. We have just learnt that the child's throat has been cut, i.e. his wholeness – a word closely related to "holiness"² – has been ruthlessly violated, a sort of bloody rape has been committed, and then, as if to remedy on a different plane the harm done by the Jews, the Prioress tries to convince us that what, from a materialistic point of view, is a body nearly cut in two, spiritually speaking, is a perfect whole, "wedded" together by the boy's inviolate virginity. And the problem of virginity, especially when it appears in the mouth of a religious woman of that time, is not very far from being a problem of life and death. As Chaucer's friend, John Gower wrote concerning the chastity of nuns in his Latin work, *Vox Clamantis*:

O how the virginity which follows the Lamb through all the vaults in heaven shines above every glory ! Wedded to the Godhead, it is radiant on earth, forsaking the actions to which the nature of the human body prompts it. Just as the unchaste woman is fetid, the untainted chaste one is sweet-scented. The one possesses God, the other a corpse.³

² Cf. T. F. Hoad (ed.), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 219.

³ R. P. Miller (ed.), *Chaucer – Sources and Backgrounds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 227.

Gower mentions also the taboo against raping a nun:

Therefore it is not permitted for men to violate consecrated nuns, for the sacred veil carries the mark of chastity. How heavy a crime in our judgement does a man commit who takes it upon himself to violate another's bride ! But be assured that the man who destroys nunneries and takes it upon himself to violate the bride of God sins even more heavily.⁴

Gower surely does not mean that all nuns are, or even should be, virgins in the physiological sense of the word: "But no matter what woman seeks the cloister under the veil, the rule which she obeys will sanctify her."⁵ It is the "sacred veil" itself that functions as an equivalent of the hymen, it gives a woman an artificial virginity which, however, or rather because of its artificiality, is hedged about with even more strict prohibitions than the real one. Also the violation of this kind of "super-virginity" is seen as far more pernicious in its results than an "ordinary" rape.

The hero's virginity in "The Prioress's Tale" is also a rather complicated affair. It is based of course on his "not knowing women fleshly", but there is an additional dimension to it that consists in his special relationship with the Holy Virgin, something that has much to do with "knowing women", while confirming and sublimating the boy's virginity. He is clearly obsessed with his devotion to the Virgin to the point of being immune to other women's charms. The song that he sings, *Alma Redemptoris Mater* ("Gracious mother of the Redeemer") and is never tired of singing, includes the word, *alma* which literally means "a female nourisher", or, in an adjectival sense, "life-giving", "bountiful".⁶ It is exactly in the capacity of a nourisher, and a "life-giver" that the Virgin approaches her admirer after his throat has been slit and he is on the point of dying:

"This welle of mercy, Cristes mooder swete,
I loved alwey, as after my konnyng;
And whan that I my lyf sholde forlete,
To me she cam, and bad me for to synge
This anthem verrayly in my deyng,
As ye han herd, and whan that I hadde songe,
Me thoughte she leyde a greyn upon my tonge.

ll. 656-662

The child's life is not, however, truly prolonged, he is turned into a sort of cyborg designed to reproduce incessantly and monotonously the anthem, *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, a paradoxical state which the boy himself accurately describes as "singing in my death" (l. 660). The paradox consists here also in the fact that the boy's only bodily function that is left, apart from his brief statement just before the ultimate death, is singing aloud, i.e. something that he is the least likely to be able to do because of the nature of his wound. It is also made clear that the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Cf. W. Smith and J. Lockwood, *Chambers-Murray Latin-English Dictionary* (Edinburgh, London: Chambers, John Murray, 1976), p. 37.

boy even before his death had only a very vague notion of what the anthem was about, as his “elder fellow” who explained the song to him knew “but smal gram-meere” (l. 536), i.e. was not good at Latin. The young martyr acquires thus a rather disquieting nature of a human gramophone transmitting sounds and notions whose place of origin is completely outside him.

The mechanical nature of the boy’s “life in death” is stressed by the motif of the grain on the young martyr’s tongue:

“Wherfore I synge, and synge moot certeyn,
In honour of that blisful Mayden free
Til fro my tonge of takes is the greyn;
And after that thus seyde she to me:
‘My litel child, now wol I fecche thee,
Whan that the greyn is fro thy tonge ytake.
Be nat agast; I woll the nat forsake.’”

ll. 663–669

The “holy monk” that is looking after the boy immediately takes away the grain bringing about the child’s instantaneous, though peaceful, demise, an effect that strongly resembles switching off an electrical appliance. The grain staves off the moment of death and guarantees the boy’s anomalous existence. It may readily remind the reader of the Greek mythological obol, i.e. a small coin placed under the dead body’s tongue, rather than on it as in “The Prioress’s Tale”, and enabling the dead to pay the fare to Charon, the mythical ferryman who conveyed souls across the Styx to their ultimate destination in the Underworld.⁷ The obol and Chaucer’s grain symbolise both the transition between life and death, and the act of taking them away means a decisive abandonment of the realm of the living. The Greek custom of placing an obol in the dead person’s mouth was probably related to the widespread fear of the revenant ghosts, the spirits of the dead who cannot find peace because they have not been properly buried. The grain in “the Prioress’s Tale” is also clearly related to the problem of burial as it enables the young martyr to signal the place where his dead, or half-dead, body can be found, and thus make a Christian funeral possible. The Virgin appears here as a figure resembling Charon, the ferryman of the shades, which is in keeping with the title she is given in the anthem, *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, where she is called, *Porta manes*, a phrase left untranslated in the Middle English version of the anthem, where the expression “Heaven’s gate”⁸ seems to refer

⁷ Cf. M. C. Howatson, I. Chilvers (eds.), *The Concise Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 117.

⁸ L. D. Benson (ed.), *The Riverside*. . . , p. 915. The beginning of this anthem, still quite popular in the Catholic Church, is:

Alma Redemptoris Mater, quae pervia caeli
Porta manes, et stella maris, succurre cadenti.
Surgere qui curat, populo.

The provided Middle English translation goes as follows:

Godus Moder, Mylde and Clene
Hevene yate and Sterre of se
Sauc thi peple from synne and we (woe).

to the Latin *quae pervia caeli*, and which would have to be translated as “the gate to the Underworld”, “the gate to the realm of the dead”, or at least “the gate of the souls of the departed”, as such are the usual meanings of the Latin word, *manes*.⁹ The Virgin could be then thought of as a guide of all souls, no matter if they are heading for the Underworld or the “Overworld”, heaven or hell. The wholeness and integrity of virginity as such, which we have already discussed, makes it natural to look in the Virgin also for dark and threatening aspects, as well as the more usual “mild” and “sweet” ones.

And yet there is something more deeply moving, more essentially sentimental, in the discussed scene. A sense of *déjà vu* may easily overtake us when contemplating the misfortunes of the young worshipper of the Virgin in Chaucer’s tale. We realise that his story bears a striking resemblance to some traditional love stories, such as the story of Romeo and Juliet, where the heroine drinks a potion that is going to make her apparently lifeless for 42 hours until she is woken up by her lover, or the story of the Sleeping Beauty, wounded by a spindle, and consigned to a death-like sleep, or the story of Snow White, whom the wicked stepmother tries to kill with a poisoned apple, but instead of dying she falls asleep until a prince charming come and brings her back to life with a kiss, or, like in the classical version by the Brothers Grimm, the prince’s servants, who carry the coffin with Snow White within, stumble over a bush, which makes a bit of the poisoned apple “fly out of her throat”.¹⁰ All of the above are stories including the motif of the heroine’s magic sleep, a paradoxical sleep that is very close to death, from which she wakes up to fall into her lover’s arms, even though, as in “Romeo and Juliet”, this project is not fulfilled, the lover’s arms are cold with the cold of death, and the heroine passes, analogically to Chaucer’s young martyr, from half-death to a fully-fledged, “mature” death.

We have to do with very ancient, archetypal stories that explore the middle ground between the erotic and the morbid, between love and death. The fact that it is usually a girl, rather than a boy, that is the protagonist of such tales seems to indicate, according to the supporters of a psychoanalytic approach to folktales, such as Bruno Bettelheim, that they are tales about the loss of virginity, represented by Sleeping Beauty’s wound or by Snow White’s eating of a red half of the poisoned apple, even though these events precede rather than follow the slumber, which, in its turn, is seen as betokening the heroine’s virginity, i.e. a state of spiritual and physical barrenness and low activity, from which she has to be awoken by a representative of the opposite sex. A way out of this contradiction is to assume that the traumatic events that cause the girl’s sleep symbolise the beginning of her menstruation, but structurally this theory does not make sense as menstruation is no way connected with being or not being a virgin.¹¹ Whatever

⁹ Cf. W. Smith and J. Lockwood, *Chambers-Murray*. . . , p. 421.

¹⁰ Cf. J. L. C. and W. C. Grimm, *Grimms’ Fairy Tales* (Ware: Wordsworth / Children’s Classics, 1993), pp. 220–221.

¹¹ Such interpretations can be found in the book by B. Bettelheim, “The Uses of Enchantment. The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales”. Cf. B. Bettelheim, *Cudowne i pożyteczne. O znaczeniach i wartościach baśni*, tr. D. Danek (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1985), Vol. 2, pp. 91–95, and 123–131.

the contradictions of the psychoanalytic approach, it remains true that folktales lend themselves quite easily to allegorical interpretations focused on the matters of sex and eroticism.

Connecting "The Prioress's Tale" with such tales presents several difficulties of which apparently the most obvious one is the male sex of the protagonist of Chaucer's tale. This difficulty is not so great as it seems as the tales like "Sleeping Beauty" belong to a great family of narratives known, in S. Thompson's taxonomy of folktales, as "Tales about Supernatural Husbands and Wives", which means that their supernatural protagonist may also be male, as, for example, in the famous story of "Cupid and Psyche", although, admittedly, this happens much less often, at least in classical and best known versions of the tales.¹² A regular feature of those tales is the occurrence of such motifs as magic sleep, magic forgetfulness, sudden estrangement of a loving couple, or the protagonist's loss of the power of speech.¹³ All of them, in keeping with the logic of the rites of passage and all sorts of initiation rituals, are periods of crisis and of difficult, or impossible, communication that can be generally referred to as so many kinds of "enchantment",¹⁴ which precede the moment of awakening, recognition, or reconciliation, i.e. of a broadly conceived "disenchantment", usually associated with a sexual fulfilment such as marriage, though in complex folktales there may be several enchantments and disenchantments. Enchantment is obviously, at least in some respects, a death-like state that creates in the reader or listener an expectation that it will eventually be overcome, and for the primitive imagination reflected in folktales such an overcoming was almost invariably connected with the celebration of a sexual union, i.e. of procreation and fertility. Virginity, if we accept it as a form of enchantment, in this context may only be a negative value, even though it may be sometimes nostalgically harked back to by some, not necessarily female, characters, who may, for example, want to return to their animal (enchanted) form, and to single life, when offended by their partners.¹⁵

An attentive reader must have long ago noticed that it is possible to make a particularly strong connection between "The Prioress's Tale" and the tales of the "Snow White" type, provided we accept the strongly paradoxical nature of this connection. In Chaucer's tale we have to do with a male Snow White whose enchantment, connected with accepting the grain, an equivalent of the magic apple, ends with a momentary awakening which is only a short prelude to the hero's ultimate and irrevocable death, which is something that does not normally happen in folktales. It is as if death and life changed places in Chaucer, the temporary and paradoxical death in "Snow White" tales appears here as superficial and

¹² Cf. S. Thompson, *The Folktale* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 87–105.

¹³ The motif of the loss of the power of speech, eventually regained, seems to be limited to female protagonists only.

¹⁴ The most classical form of enchantment is of course the assuming of an animal, or monstrous form, which also happens very frequently in the tales of supernatural husbands and wives.

¹⁵ Cf. S. Thompson, *The Folktale*, p. 90.

anomalous life that covers the deeper reality of death, the supposed disenchantment, related to the removal of the grain from the boy's tongue, instead of being a triumph of life and sexuality, is a confirmation of the protagonist's death and of his virginity. The young martyr's life is apparently death-centred, although there is also the dimension of his afterlife which, no doubt, will be full of bliss and glory.

The grain, just as Snow White's apple, is used by an ingenious woman to produce a state of lethargy which precludes a proper burial, in "The Prioress's Tale" she is, however, a benevolent figure a reunion with whom, though achieved only after death, is an equivalent of the marriage motif in folktales. Interesting in this respect are the Jews, who look like a malignant version of "Snow White" dwarfs, forming also a homogenous, undifferentiated group totally engrossed in their mundane job of acquiring, by any means possible, more and more wealth:

Amonges Cristene folk a Jewerye,
Sustened by a lord of that contree
For foule usure and lucre of vileynye,
ll. 489-491

And yet they are trusted with a function reminiscent of the wicked stepmother, i.e. they are murderers motivated by a feeling of irrational enmity, though they, unlike the jealous queen, are quite successful in carrying out their murderous designs.

It seems that "The Prioress's Tale" may be said to function on two levels of abstraction, on the lower level it is a sort of "anti-folktale", a story that stands certain traditional expectations on their head, that uses initiatory paradigms in order to uphold the principle of death rather than life, that treats religious love as a sentiment closely related to death and hatred of other creeds. From this point of view the motto, *Amor vincit omnia* is heavily ironical, in "The Prioress's Tale" the protagonist's ardent religious sentiments lead to no positive effects, but only to an outbreak of implacable hostility, and love, as shown in the tale, reveals its utter ineffectuality, even God's love for His most devoted champions appears unable to save them, or at least to avenge their death. It is interesting, incidentally, that in this clearly anti-Semitic tale no mention is made of any of the Jews being punished for their misdeeds, nor are even any anti-Jewish measures contemplated, as if the Jews' malicious actions were a kind of natural disaster one can do nothing about, although the identity of the culprits is not even for a moment questioned.

On the other hand, "The Prioress's Tale" offers a vision of fulfilment in the hero's union with his "lady love", i.e. the Virgin. It is a fulfilment in virginity which seems impossible in physical terms, and for this reason is achievable only after death and through death. Death is then in "The Prioress's Tale" what life is in ordinary folktales, and the hero's bliss consists in being "awoken" to death after a paradoxical period, typical of almost all legendary heroes and heroines, of hovering in the intermediate zone between life and death.

It would be interesting to compare Chaucer's tale to another famous religious legend, that of "The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus", the "sleepers" awake after

spending several centuries in a cave, having fled from the persecution of Christians under a Roman emperor. They fall into a miraculous sleep from which they wake up after several centuries, without realising how much time has elapsed. When they imparted their story to the local bishop they quietly die out of old age.¹⁶ Stories about a magic loss of the count of time, and of the heroes' reappearance after a unnaturally long period of absence are quite common within the broad category of the tales about supernatural wives. We meet there typically with a hero who is seduced by a supernatural woman and spends some enchanting moments with her, moments that in fact may turn out to be years, so that when he finally returns it may happen that his lifetime has already passed, and he is no longer a living man but a spectre, a revenant ghost from the past.¹⁷ A similar story was used much later by John Keats in his *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, i.e. a story that presents death as a necessary consequence of seduction, and conceives of the lover's life after death as a dreamlike, unreal existence, suspended between this world and the other.

In "The Prioress's Tale" the Virgin is explicitly seen the one who assists those who are in death throes, cf. the Latin *succurre cadenti*, which is rendered in the tale as "to been oure help and socour whan we deye" (l. 534).¹⁸ In the tale she is indeed associated with the transition stage between life and death, also as the one who prolongs the hero's hovering between the two worlds. But the analogy with *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* can be pinned on "The Prioress's Tale" also without resorting to an overtly heretical interpretation. W. W. Skeat mentions, among analogues of "The Prioress's Tale", a ballad found in Percy's "Reliques":

The Ballad alluded to is called "The Jew's Daughter" by Percy, and is to the effect that a boy named Hugh was enticed to play and then stabbed by a Jew's daughter, who threw him into a draw-well. His mother, Lady Helen, finds him by hearing his voice.¹⁹

The ballad provides a missing link between the Prioress's story and the motifs of seduction and *femme fatale*, but, as the present study has shown, the story, even as it stands, abounds in erotic overtones which play there a hardly less prominent role than in the presentation of the Prioress in the "General Prologue", even though in the tale they are curiously entwined with the theme of death. This should not be very surprising as the connection between death, or old age, and eroticism was one of Chaucer's favourite topics, visible also in "The Merchant's Tale", "The Miller's Tale", or in "The Book of the Duchess", where it is perhaps the most poignantly expressed.

¹⁶ Cf. M. Plezia (ed.), *Jakub de Voragine, Złota legenda* (The Golden Legend), tr. J. Plezia (Warszawa: PAX, 1955), pp. 259–263.

¹⁷ A Welsh story of this sort, called "King Herla", is adduced as an analogue to "Sir Orfeo" in the standard edition of the tale, A. J. Bliss (ed.), *Sir Orfeo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 35. The plots of the Middle English romance, "Sir Launfal", and of "Lanval", a tale by Marie de France also include the motifs of the hero's seduction and stay in the Otherworld.

¹⁸ This connection is made by W. W. Skeat in his edition of "The Prioress's Tale", cf. W. W. Skeat (ed.), *Chaucer – The Prioresses Tale, Sire Thopas, The Monkes Tale, The Clerkes Tale, The Squieres Tale – from The Canterbury Tales* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1951), p. 148.

¹⁹ Ed. W. W. Skeat, *Chaucer* . . . , p. xxiii.

Andrzej Wicher

Badanie granic erotyzmu w *Opowieści Przeoryszy* Geoffreya Chaucera

Streszczenie

Artykuł ten podejmuje kilka problemów związanych z interpretacją *Opowieści Przeoryszy*, która należy do gatunku znanego jako „żywoty świętych”. Sama Przeorysza jest przedstawiona w „Prologu głównym” do *Opowieści kanterberyjskich* jako wysoce zalotna kobieta, która jedynie częściowo skrywa swoje wdzięki pod zakonnym habitem. Z analizy *Opowieści Przeoryszy* wynika przede wszystkim, że utwór ten, podobnie jak i opis Przeoryszy z „Prologu głównego”, zawiera wiele ukrytych motywów i aluzji o charakterze erotycznym, które oczywiście nie podważają jego, zasadniczo dewocyjnego, charakteru. Erotyzm *Opowieści Przeoryszy* jest ściśle związany z, centralną dla tego utworu, tematyką dziewictwa i śmierci, ulegając dzięki temu daleko idącej sublimacji. Uderzające są równocześnie analogie, częściowo prześledzone w niniejszym artykule, między czternastowiecznym utworem Chaucera a starożytnymi mitami i schematami baśniowymi, przynależnymi do tak dobrze znanych opowieści jak *Śpiąca królewna* czy *Królewna Śnieżka*. Baśnie te, jak już wielu krytyków zauważyło, zawierają również, mniej lub bardziej zakamuflowane, elementy erotyczne, w których motyw utraty dziewictwa jest ściśle związany, podobnie jak w *Opowieści Przeoryszy*, z motywem śmierci lub pozornej śmierci. Autor wspiera swoje wnioski pracami B. Bettelheima, S. Thompsona i W. W. Skeata, jak również stara się umieścić interesujące go aspekty *Opowieści Przeoryszy* w szerszym kontekście *Opowieści kanterberyjskich*.

Andrzej Wicher

Les frontières de l'érotisme dans le *Conte de l'Abbesse* de Geoffrey Chaucer

Résumé

L'article traite de problèmes liés avec l'interprétation du *Conte de l'Abbesse* qui appartient au genre hagiographique. L'abbesse elle-même est présentée dans le „Prologue général” aux *Contes de Canterbury* comme une femme très frivole qui ne cache que partiellement ses charmes sous l'habit de religieuse.

L'analyse du *Conte de l'Abbesse* prouve que ce texte, ainsi que la description de l'Abbesse au „Prologue général”, contient beaucoup de motifs et d'allusions latentes de caractère érotique ce qui ne contredit pas le sens général de cet ouvrage essentiellement pieux. L'érotisme du *Conte de l'Abbesse* est étroitement lié avec le thème central de l'oeuvre: celui de la virginité et de la mort; grâce à cela il subit une profonde sublimation. Ce qui frappe surtout, ce sont les analogies, en partie étudiées dans le présent article, entre le texte de Chaucer produit au XIV^e siècle et les mythes antiques, ainsi que les schémas de contes de fées aussi connus que *La Belle au Bois Dormant* et *Blanche-Neige*.

Comme l'ont remarqué maints critiques, ces contes de fées contiennent aussi, plus ou moins camouflés, des éléments érotiques où le motif de la perte de virginité est étroitement lié à celui de la mort ou de la mort apparente. L'auteur de l'article s'appuie dans la partie finale sur les travaux de B. Bettelheim, de S. Thompson et de W. W. Sheat. Il essaie également de montrer les aspects du *Conte de l'Abbesse* qui l'intéressent sur la toile de fond des *Contes de Canterbury*.